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ABSTRACT

Research on test taking skills of LD (learning disabled) students is reviewed and implications for improving the skill are noted. Among findings considered are that separate answer sheets appear to inhibit the performance of LD students, LD students can benefit from training and demonstrate improved attitudes toward testing, and students should answer all questions and should be encouraged to change any answer of which they are unsure. Intervention in test taking includes six quidelines: focus on the appropriate stimulus, attend to all distractors, answer all questions, never skip an answer, guess at an answer if necessary, and attend to the appropriate stimulus in the question. The paper concludes with four multiple choice questions designed to illustrate test-taking skills and strategies. (CL)

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# Improving the Test-Taking Skills of Learning Disabled Students

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## Do separate answer sheets inhibit the performance of learning disabled students?

Yes, according to a recent study performed at Utah State University, LD and nondisabled students were given three subtests of the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS) for which correct answers were identified in the test book. Students were instructed to record the correct answers on the separate answer sheet as quickly and efficiently as possible. Learning disabled students' performance was found to be slower, less accurate, and less neat than their nonhandicapped peers. Figure A shows differences between LD and regular classroom students with respect to accuracy and fluency on completion of the separate answer sheet. This discrepancy could contribute to measurement error in the LD population. However, it would also seem that LD students improved appreciably in use of separate answer sheets with practice. Figure B shows increase in fluency and accuracy of LD students after only three practice sessions with teacher feedback.

## Are learning disabled students deficient in test-taking skills? If so, do learning disabled students benefit from training?

Yes, learning disabled students are deficient in test-taking skills. Scruggs (1984, 1985) found LD students differed from their nonhandicapped peers with respect to use of appropriate strategies on standardized achievement tests. These strategy deficits included use of prior knowledge, use of deductive reasoning skills, attention to appropriate distractors, and selection of strategies appropriate to correctly answering different types of items.

Recently, LD students have been trained in using appropriate test-taking strategies. Results indicated that test scores of trained students improved as much as 8-10 percentile points on reading achievement tests over untrained control students (Scruggs & Mastropieri, in press). In addition, a separate investigation revealed that students' attitude toward tests qualitatively improved as a result of training.

# Should guessing and answer changing be encouraged?

Usually students are advised not to guess on standarized multiple choice tests. However, according to Hammerton (1965) and Bauer (1973), testwise students tend to guess more often than their naive counterparts, and as a result, obtain higher scores. Thus, an appropriate guessing strategy should be employed.

Ebel (1965) concludes from his study with true/false tests that "students seeking highest scores on a test are well advised to answer all questions even when the usual correction is applied (their blind guesses to true/false tend to be correct more than half of the time)."

The problem to solve now becomes "How does a test-taker decide which answer is the best guess?" Numerous testwiseness suggestions are provided by Millman's (1969) and Smith's (1982) guidelines.

Beck (1978) studied the effect of changing item responses on scores of elementary school children on a standardized achievement test. Results clearly indicated that response changes on multiple-choice items tend to improve test scores.

In spite of conventional wisdom regarding guessing and answer changing, research evidence indicates that:

— Students should answer all questions, even when guessing is penalized.

— Students should be encouraged to change any answer they have had second thoughts about.

# What should LD students be taught about test taking?

Our recent research indicates that LD students benefit most from extended, guided practice and general familiarity with test conventions and formats. To this end, LD students should be given relevant practice with questions and formats similar to those which they will see on achievement tests. (Students, of course, should not be given the exact items they will be tested on.)

In addition, the following strategies have been successfully taught to LD students and have been effective in improving test scores:

1. Never skip an answer.

2. Be certain to attend to all distractors and refer to the reading passage, even if you are "very sure" your answer is correct.

3. If you are having great difficulty reading a passage, read the questions and try to answer them anyway. If you have difficulty with some words in the questions, or distractors, answer anyway and base your answers on the words you can read.

4. If you have attended to all parts of a passage and test question and still do not know an answer, there is still a good chance of getting the correct answer if you guess.

5. Be certain you are attending to the appropriate stimulus, such as the underlined sound in a "word study skills" subtest. As in other subtests, wrong answer choices are given which may look correct at first glance.

6. Make sure you answer every item, even if you must hurry and guess a lot near the end. You will probably get some of the answers correct.

Examples and practice activities will help develop these test-taking skills.

# How are your test-taking skills?

1. The short story, "The Four Seasons," is about:
   a. vegetation in North America
   b. wind current and their effects
   c. the changing weather
   d. the growth process

2. The greatest advantage of using slent in the manufacture of steel is that slent makes steel
   a. transparent
   b. stainless
   c. heavy
   d. bulky

3. The Japanese game of paduki
   a. can only be played by the Imperial Family
   b. is sometimes played indoors
   c. can never be played for more than 30 minutes
   d. is always played at every celebration

4. When Bestor crystals are added to water
   a. heat is given off
   b. the temperature of the solution rises
   c. the solution turns blue
   d. the container becomes warmer

The reasoning strategies are explained, followed by the correct answer:

1. The convergence strategy (stem), recently described by Smith (1982), involves teaching test-takers to examine all choices presented after the stem of a multiple-choice question in order to analyze the relationships of the distractors to each other and, thereby, identify the choice most likely to be correct. (1. c).

2. Absurd options can be eliminated as incorrect choices, and thus, increase the probability of choosing the correct answer. (Gibb, 1964). (2. b).

3. Specific determiners (e.g., always, never, all), are words which provide cues to the likely correctness of choices, especially on true/false items. (Slakter, 1970). (3. b).

4. Identifying similar (but slightly different) options again narrows down the possibility of choosing incorrect answers. (Millman,

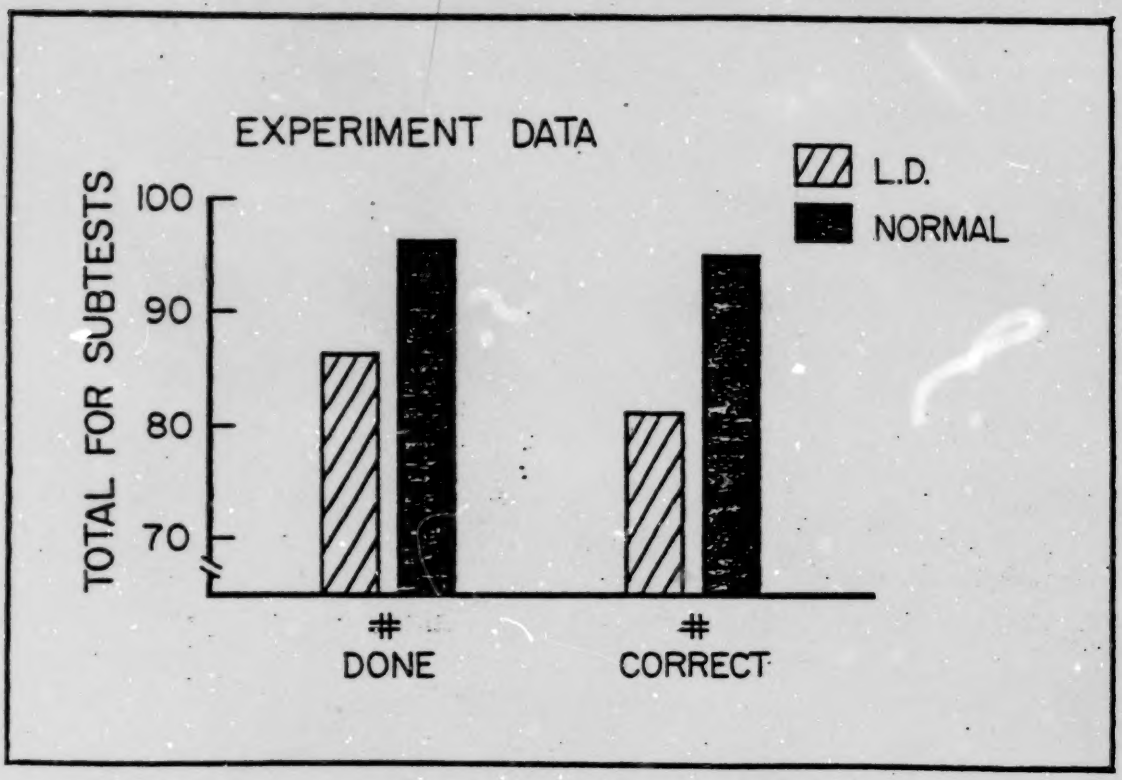


Figure A

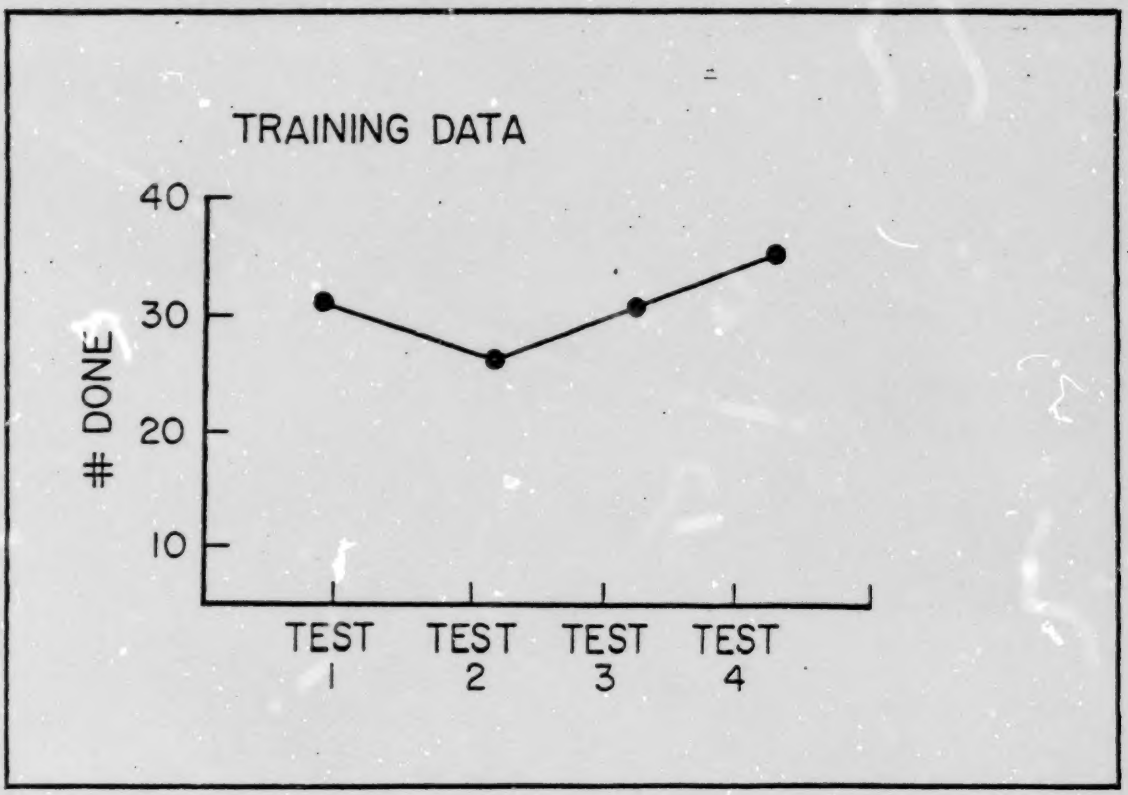


Figure B

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